

Lesson 3 Shape Choices, Make Changes

Reading 1

From Scarcity to Desire

Do you like potatoes? French fries, potato pancakes, and potato soup are some of many potato dishes people love. The potato was first brought to Europe from South America in the 16th century. However, people in Prussia (now Germany) and France refused to eat them until the 18th century.

King Frederick II of Prussia realized the value of potatoes during the War of the Austrian Succession (1740-1748). Frederick believed potatoes would keep his people from starving during wars. This plant from South America was easy to grow. It also provided a lot of nutrition very quickly and did not need very much land. Determined to have his people eat potatoes, Frederick passed an order to ensure they were cultivated.

Unfortunately, the peasants were not too keen on the idea. In Prussia, there was a saying: "What the peasant does not know, he will not eat." In fact, this was the official response from one Prussian town to the king's order: "Potatoes have neither smell nor taste. Not even the dogs will eat them. So what use are they to us?"

So Frederick faced an unexpected problem: Potatoes were great products, but the people did not want them. To tackle this, the king used a classic marketing strategy: scarcity. He made potatoes more appealing not by promoting them but by making them hard to get. Scarcity or limited availability tends to make things more desirable. Therefore, Frederick had potato fields around Berlin and ordered his army to guard the valuable produce from thieves. The show generated plenty of interest, and it was not long before many peasants wanted some of these valuable plants. Frederick understood this and commanded the guards to take a break or look the other way when the peasants started stealing potatoes. Soon potatoes became widely cultivated. Ever since the success of Frederick's marketing strategy, they have been firmly established in the Austrian and German diets.

Like the Prussians, the French at first disliked potatoes. They called them "hog feed" and believed that they caused Hansen's disease. There was little surprise then when the French parliament officially banned potatoes in 1748.

Then came Antoine-Augustin Parmentier, a French pharmacist who served in the army during the Seven Years' War (1756-1763). Parmentier was captured by the Prussians and imprisoned. In prison, he was compelled to eat potatoes, and they kept him alive. Leaving him completely free from Hansen's disease and other diseases, his time as a prisoner opened Parmentier's eyes. When he was released at the end of the war, Parmentier returned to Paris and convinced the French government to repeal the potato ban. He then devised a plan to convince people to eat potatoes. He turned a large plot of land he owned into a potato patch and then hired heavily armed guards to make a great show of guarding the potatoes. Naturally, Parmentier's guards were given orders to allow thieves to get away with stolen potatoes. If anyone offered a bribe in exchange for potatoes, the guards were instructed to take the bribe, no matter how large or small. The result was exactly as you would think: People began stealing Parmentier's potatoes.

Frederick and Parmentier were enemies in war, but both fought against prejudice in their own countries to spread the potato. There is also much to learn from their marketing strategy. Work by neuroscientists has proved that restricting the availability of a product or service will trigger desire. Examples of such marketing include limited editions, closing dates for offers, and positioning at an exclusive price point.

These potato marketing stories have passed into legend. People still come to leave potatoes on Frederick's tombstone in Potsdam. Parmentier's heritage is immortalized in the names of French potato dishes, including Crème Parmentier (potato soup) and Salade Parmentier (potato salad). There are a Parisian road and a Parisian subway station named "Parmentier" in his honor. The station even has a statue of Parmentier handing a potato to a farmer.

Reading 2

The Art of Subtle Influence

You are in the line at a cafeteria, holding your tray. As you walk past the steaming pans of food, you see that beef has been placed behind green beans. This is a subtle suggestion that you should eat vegetables before eating meat. In the social sciences, this kind of indirect inducement is called a "nudge." The dictionary meaning of a nudge is a light touch or push intended to draw a person's attention to something. As a social science concept, a nudge is an indirect encouragement to act in one way rather than another. Therefore, placing vegetables in the front row counts as a nudge, but telling students to eat vegetables first does not.

Nudging is about designing choices to indirectly encourage people to make positive decisions for themselves and society. It often involves presenting visual elements or language that can subtly motivate people to act in a certain way. The following are some representative types of nudge.

Setting a Default Option

A default option is a fixed choice that takes effect unless someone directly changes it. People will often choose to go with the default option they are presented with. Therefore, setting a certain option as the default increases the possibility that people will pick it. In some countries, organ donation is checked by default on driver's licenses. Countries with default organ donation programs have an average of over ninety-percent participation, while countries without such programs average only fifteen.

Creating a Psychological Anchor

A psychological anchor is an initial piece of information people rely on when making judgments and decisions. For example, a charity seeking donations can create a psychological anchor by telling potential donors that most people donate twenty dollars. This can nudge people who had initially thought of donating less than twenty dollars to donate more than they would have otherwise.

Turning “Work” into “Play”

In South Africa, thousands of people die from preventable diseases like cholera every year. The most vulnerable group affected by these diseases is children. The simple act of washing hands frequently with soap is the most effective way to prevent infections. However, providing children with soap and encouraging them to use it regularly presents a real challenge.

A nonprofit organization created Hope Soap, a see-through bar of soap with a small toy inside. The only way to get to the toy is to use the soap. Not only did free bars of Hope Soap reduce infections, but they also changed the personal cleanliness habits of children.

Making Things Visible

A small town in Iceland used an artistic illusion to reduce the risk of road accidents. On one street, they painted a three-dimensional zebra crossing that appeared to be floating in the air. This optical illusion prompts drivers instinctively to reduce their speed.

Nudge principles and techniques are now employed in diverse circumstances where people seek to influence others. Not everyone will follow the intention of the nudge, of course. Yet nudges, however small, can bring about big changes. And we can expect them to increase the overall good of society.